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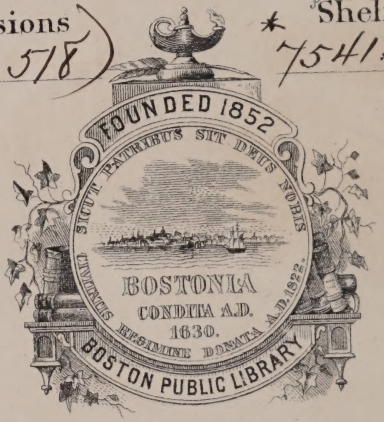

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DISCOURSE

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IN COMMEMORATION OF THE

PILGRIM FATHERS

BY

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DISCOURSE.

"Before Abraham was, I am." — JOHN viii., 53.

THE preacher who stands before you to-day is expected to go out of the ordinary range of pulpit topics. This season is consecrated to us by the events which not only fixed our name and our race on this spot, but which created New England, and, more than any other set of occurrences, created the United States of America. Fit as these days are for that commemoration which they receive all over this country, it is in this place not simply fitting but dutiful, not merely our opportunity but our necessity, that we should draw our memories, our thoughts, our lessons, from the arrival of those fathers whose work was so faithful, so precious, and so lasting.

And yet, while we make this day's service their memorial, we dare not forget that it is a service, or what this day is. I should have no right, even if you would allow me, to turn this discourse into a lecture, or this hour of worship to Almighty God into a celebration, such as might fittingly be held next Tuesday. To forget, in celebrating the deeds and the virtues of men, that this is the Lord's day would have been to those men and those women an insult, and not an honor. The dust of my own sainted ancestor, last survivor in Plymouth of those who signed the compact at the Cape, would quiver in horror on the hill behind us at such forgetfulness; and a responsive shudder of grief would come from that older sepulchre in front, where, among the unknown yet honored dead, sleep the parents of his youthful wife, victims of that first terrible winter.

Nay, if we are to make an anniversary of to-day, it does not recall so exactly the landing and exploration of the eleventh of December as it does the repose of the tenth, when, on yonder island, scarcely saved by the mighty hand of God from the savage on land and the wild waves at sea, soaked and starving and shelterless, that boat's crew of eight did not dare to press forward in the search of a harbor for themselves and their dear ones till they had given to the Lord of Hosts the day which they recognized as all his own.

Therefore it is that, in seeking to assist in your annual commemoration of your beloved ancestors, I feel bound to do so with all the rites and rules proper to the day and house of God, and to take my theme and illustrations from this volume which, in King James's version, was just ceasing to be a novelty to them, and is getting antiquated to us. I do not start with them as if they founded something new and unknown to humanity, by an operation of Providence as startling as the discovery of a new continent or a new planet. Whether they should receive that crown, others may decide; I know very well they would have rejected it. I would rather see if there is not still to be found spiritual food for this memorial day in that old story which they pondered so closely and loved so well. Surely, it would have gratified them to think that, two centuries and two-thirds after their landing, their descendants could piously trace the types and parallels of their career in the history of God's chosen people, and find their Origin and their Departure not dimly hinted in the Genesis and Exodus of old. Surely, John Carver and William Bradford would not have refused to listen to a preacher who could liken their story to the story of Abraham. Shall we?

The patriarch Abraham is the name that seems to stand out at the head of that line which we call history with much of the same distinctness that belongs to Aristides and Scipio, to Alfred and St. Louis, to John Winthrop and William Brewster. He has a definite career and a personal character; and that career and that character seem to me a singu-

lar foreshadowing of those of our fathers. Like theirs, his native home, Chaldæa, is a rich and contented land,— a land which, through many changes of rulers, had remained, on the whole, blest above its neighbor lands for peace and prosperity, where mighty cities, adorned with glorious public works, rose out of fertile fields and smiling pastures. It was a religious land,— a land filled with the signs of costly and gorgeous worship, directed by a mighty band of priests, engaged in maintaining in equal honor the altar and the throne. There was no better country then for a contented, easy man than Chaldæa. There was no better country in the year 1600 for a contented, easy man than England.

But Abraham, like our fathers, could not be contented or easy. The religion which enlisted all the art and wealth of his people in its service was to him a superstition. Over the boundless plains along the Euphrates, the shepherds and farmers looked up through a cloudless sky to the starry host of heaven, five-sixths of whose glittering expanse was revealed to their attentive gaze. They looked, they wondered, they studied, they worshipped. That glittering host, to whose abode they tried to climb by their gigantic tower, became as gods to them, and they bowed before the stars and planets as their very deities ; and they boasted that to worship Arcturus and Saturn was so much purer than the religion of Egypt that served cats and crocodiles. But it was not pure enough for Abraham. He could not stay in the luxurious plains where the priests of the sun-god Belus held his soul in chains. Out of the starry heavens, their Maker had spoken to him. Beyond the brightness of the sun, he who set the sun in his tent and made him run his course called to him to regard the glory which was beyond Sirius and the strength that was mightier than Orion. With that voice ringing in his ears, with that vision filling his eyes, he could not stay. He leaves his native land ; and, even as our fathers, for the sake of God, passed from Scrooby to Leyden, so Abraham, for the sake of God, journeyed from Ur to Haran.

But that journey was not the end. Even in Haran, he is still in Chaldæa between the rivers; he is still in the wealthy plains that fill men's minds with the thoughts of gain, and draw them from regard to the Eternal. His own father's kindred had followed him there. He has his home, he has his wealth; the priests of the sun and the stars are down in Nineveh and Babylon,— what more does he need? He needs to have a land all his own; he needs to be free. Whatever separates him from God, who is his life, separates him from life itself. His new faith must go and exercise itself in a wild land,— a land where he will require hard labor and self-denying patience, and perhaps battles with the worthless Canaanites who dwell in the land, before he can settle himself in anything like prosperity.

And so, like our fathers, he moves again. With a diminished company, he leaves many of those who are nearest to him. He crosses the great river and breasts the barren desert as our fathers breasted the ocean. He pitches his tent in a strange, rugged country, as totally different from the glades of Haran or the plains of Babylon, as Massachusetts is different from Holland or Yorkshire. He cheerfully allows his younger kinsman to occupy the more fruitful plain of the Jordan, and contents himself with the less smiling districts. He has many a struggle with war and poverty, dwelling in tents, and knows no abiding city. His eldest, and perhaps darling son, cannot abide the restraints of home, and goes forth into an even wilder and harder field as the pioneer of Arabia. But through it all he is sustained by faith. He knows whom he has trusted, and is persuaded that he is able to keep his promise. By him he is bidden to look up into the starry heavens, once blazing with the eyes of so many jealous deities, now glorious with the lamps of his father's palace. He is told that his posterity shall be as numerous as those stars, and shall hold the whole land from Egypt to the great river, and from the mountains of Lebanon to the desert of Sinai.

Is not this the very story of our fathers? "They were

called to go out into a place which they should after receive for an inheritance, and they obeyed and went out, not knowing where they went; by faith they sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles, for they looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Therefore sprang there from few, and they as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the seashore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country; and, truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he hath prepared for them a city." I have repeated these words concerning Abraham and his descendants from the familiar chapter in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Could the story of our fathers be better told, if we wrote it now?

The memory of Abraham is still cherished throughout Western Asia. The Arabians still cling to their descent from his wild son Ishmael. The reform of Mahomet was virtually a revival of the work of Abraham in exalting the one God over the stars of heaven. But among the tribes of the East there is little left of the story of Abraham. It is chiefly his name, to which is added invariably the sweet and precious title, "the Friend of God." Would our fathers have asked any other?

But the parallel is far from ending here. The name of Abraham was cherished by the Jew as that of the founder of their nation, more than Isaac, more than Jacob which is Israel, more than Judah or Ephraim, more than Moses or David or Solomon. Their name of Hebrews, older than Jews or Israelites, recorded the fact that they were the children of the pilgrim from beyond the river. In all the

crimes which their nation committed, in all the calamities which it suffered, they considered it a sufficient answer to every accusation and every taunt, to boast that they were the children of Abraham.

He had risen above idolatry; they had relapsed into it. He had left his home beyond the Euphrates to worship God on the hills; they had been carried back to his land in base captivity because they had forgotten God. He had felt the revelation that had rejected human sacrifices, and had the courage, in the solitude of the Mount, to rescue his own child from the murder of the old priestly law; they, in the temple on that very Mount, were loading the spiritual law with deeper and deeper exactions of bigotry. Yet he was their father, and they were self-satisfied. They held up his name as a shield against John the Baptist's fiery call to repentance; and when a greater than John was trying to rouse them from the chains they were hugging, in the very hour when a Roman Governor, the deputy of a deputy sent by a foul and faithless tyrant, was controlling every breath they drew, they had the impudence to utter the lying boast, "We are Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man."

Brethren, how far are we to carry the parallel? We are proud of our descent from the Pilgrims and our inheritance of that birthright they won so hard. We had rather claim kindred with them than with the heroes of the war for the Union and the struggle for Independence, with the signers of the Constitution and the Declaration. We will not own the name of Puritan for our fathers, though that name would link them with Conant and Endicott, with Winthrop and Cotton, with the apostle Eliot and the martyr Vane. Scrooby and Leyden, Southampton and Plymouth, the Cape and the Rock, the Compact in the cabin and the Sabbath on the island, the pestilence supported and the return refused,—every experience, however slight, of that company, we cling to as our own household incidents; and no descent from kings or conquerors, from sages or orators, not if we knew that the blood of Alfred and of Shakespeare mingled in our

veins, would equal the thought that we go back to Bradford and Brewster, to Cushman and Warren, to Winslow and Howland, to John Alden and Mary Chilton.

We are Abraham's seed,— were we ever in bondage to any man? We have Abraham to our father. Is there any danger, while we fondly repeat that name, of our becoming so unworthy of it that it may be needful for God to exercise his power and raise up children to Abraham out of these stones which his descendants do not deserve to tread? I am not here to censure, to criticise, or even to examine. If there is any shortcoming in the descendants of the Pilgrims, the whole nation is responsible. Their blood is diffused so widely that they may well be compared to the progeny of Abraham in number. But I speak now merely to warn you that we are so responsible; that they gave us not merely a name to bear, but a work to do; that, if we are profiting by their toils and rejoicing out of their sufferings, it is because we have our own toils and our own sufferings, from which our descendants shall have richer profit and nobler enjoyment; and, unless we complete the Pilgrims' work, instead of resting satisfied with their memory, we are not fit to call them our fathers.

"Before Abraham was, I am." Before the Pilgrims, before the Reformers, before the Apostles, are the Eternal Right, the Eternal God, the Eternal Saviour, of whom these are but ministers through whom we believe. "Paul hath planted, and Apollos watered, but God alone giveth the increase." I have led you back to the story of Abraham, brethren, to remind you of whence our fathers derived the impulse that enabled them to bear the captivity and the exile and the voyage and the struggle. Every word in the record of the father of the chosen people was pondered over and over again by them far more earnestly than any of us ever pondered Bradford's history or Morton's memorial. They read it for an example of what they should do; or, rather, they read it as an example of how they should look up to God, and learn what to do, as revealed in the law of his prophets and the gospel of his Son.

If we would be their children, if we would carry out their work, we must do the like. We are not to suppose that they started on that work merely because they had a special energy, a special intelligence, or a special endurance. All these indeed they had; and they were encountered, as we all know, by special obstacles, special hardships, special disappointments. What gave them the victory where others failed was because they did not think of themselves at all, whether to boast of their merits or complain of their misfortunes, but simply, like Abraham, their absolute devotion and surrender to what their hearts and their consciences told them was right. The tender affection which, in that first terrible spring, poured out the most painful offices on the sick; the sternness which rebuked the unseasonable mirth at Christmas time of those whose conscience, forsooth, made them idle when workers were so scanty and so needful; the helpfulness of Winslow and the defiance of Standish to the Indians; the overflowing welcome to Winthrop and the unconquerable dislike of Lyford, are all the direct results of their constant determination to refer everything to the will of God, as they found it laid down in his Word. From that Word their sainted pastor prophesied there was yet more light to break forth. Have we searched for that light? Have we made it our business to serve God even better than they served him? If more light has come to us, if we can afford to say that we understand truth and right better than our Fathers did,— I will not gainsay the boast, I do not lament, as some do, that we have gone backwards,— but I do say that, unless we strive to be as faithful to our new lights as they were to their old, unless we till our broad fields, whether earthly or heavenly, as well as they tilled their narrow ones, we had better forget we are their children, and let the stones, the stars, the sea, and the books alone, tell the tale to future visitors.

In the New Testament, the genealogy of Christ after the flesh is twice given. His legal or royal pedigree begins with Abraham as the founder of the nation, and is traced down

through patriarchs and kings till it comes to the carpenter Joseph. But his true human genealogy, as given by Luke, begins with the holy name and goes upward, through a line varying in many names, still to Abraham. But it does not stop there; it goes on to the generations before the migration, before the flood, till it ends at last "which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God."

Even so, brethren, may we take the Mayflower's company for our starting point, and trace their names, their blood, and their institutions downward to this hour, and outward over all the continent, in the day that we are to pronounce their memorial. We may call them wonderful, counsellors, the fathers of the everlasting age, the princes of peace! But if they are to be to us more than names of glory, if we are to learn the causes of their greatness and the incentives to our own duty, we must go backwards and upwards to Him who was the source of all their wisdom and all their virtue. We may find in our streets the parcel of ground that some Jacob of ours gave to his son Joseph, and may point out his well; but while we sit there at noontide, and drink of its waters, let there take his place, unseen, by our side one greater than our father Jacob, who can give us living water, that whosoever drinketh thereof shall never thirst.

The glory which fathers or founders stamp upon their country or their race is exactly proportionate to the share which they have prayed God to have in the work. "Before Abraham was, I am." Plymouth claims to be nobler than Mexico, or Peru, or Ontario, because Pizarro's greed of gain and Cortez's passion for adventure and La Salle's loyalty to his king, one and all, higher or lower, bear the stamp of an earthly conscience as contrasted with the devotion of Carver and Brewster to the Lord of all. If Plymouth ever lets that seal grow dull, if she allows her people to substitute a meaner glory than that of their founders, she had better, like Mexico and Peru and Canada, pass away from the sons of her Pilgrims forever.

There are scores in New England, there are some perhaps

here now, who could prove authentic descent from the conqueror of Crécy and the conqueror of Hastings, from King Alfred and Charlemagne. There are those in America who unite the blood of Webster to the blood of Bonaparte. I suppose our Israelite brethren sneer at all our proudest pedigrees, ancient or modern, and trace a veritable line back to the patriarch Abraham himself. To all such inquiries there is one answer. It is your duty to keep the glory of every noble ancestor pure, and atone for the scandal of every base one, by your own deeds. The question is, Are you a child of God in your life, whether your ancestor was Abraham or Satan? Every one who claims descent from King Edward I., whose name history is every year clearing more and more from the reproaches of his enemies, must bear the disgrace of descent from King John, whose repute is blacker with every new found record. Tell me, if you will, that you care nothing for kings, and that the fathers of Scrooby have a glory brighter than ever gleamed from an earthly crown. Yes! because they believed on him who gave them power to be the sons of God. They were born again of the Holy Spirit,— not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. If this seed of the Holy Spirit is dead in you, if you are their children only in name and blood, not in purpose and action, then go back to Scrooby Manor and till the ground for its kindly lord; go back to the library where Bradford's manuscript lies in the custody of the Bishop of London, and ask him to prescribe your service to you.

There was buried a few weeks ago, in the town where I reside, one who united to the blood of the Mayflower the most renowned blood of Massachusetts. Known to the whole country from the hour of his birth, he played in the eyes of all his fellow-citizens and of the whole world a part that the noblest might not dare to play unless sustained by the immediate presence and inspiration of God. The fathers of Plymouth and Massachusetts might well gaze from heaven with pride on their descendant, sustaining before kings the honor of his country with a bearing and a voice worthy of Winslow

and Mather, of Franklin and Jay, and of his own noble sire and grandsire. That he did so, that the name which seems to carry us back to the patriarch of all mankind derived new lustre in our generation, and kept his country where his fathers placed her, is because he knew no guides but conscience, duty, and an humble devotion to his Father and Saviour, such as John Alden and John Norton would have wished their descendant to have. While such an example is before us who are now on earth, we need not fear that the Pilgrim line is extinct. But, if you doubt for an instant that the fathers are passing from among us never to return, lift up your hearts with our Saviour's eternal word, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

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